RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

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# The Role of Housing in Aboriginal Student Success—Post-secondary Institutions in Vancouver

## INTRODUCTION

This study was carried out under the Aboriginal Scholars Housing Research and Mentoring project (ASHRAM), a previous research initiative of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC).

ASHRAM used the platform of the Aboriginal Scholars Project (ASP), a group developing new approaches to Aboriginal policy research. ASHRAM's objective was to conduct research that combined scholarship and an Aboriginal perspective and to introduce Aboriginal students to housing as a research topic.

ASP members were asked to submit research proposals based on their priorities for Aboriginal policy research in which housing was an important theme. This study resulted from one of the proposals. The two principal investigators and the four graduate students involved were Aboriginal, and the students were attending university in Vancouver.

Other organizations that helped fund and administer ASHRAM were Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and Trent University.

### Issue

The question this study deals with is:

- What role does housing play in recruiting and retaining Aboriginal students attending college and university in the urban area of Vancouver?

Additional questions were:

- What are the housing challenges and successes that Aboriginal students face on- and off-campus and in single and family residences?
- Are there housing or student support services that seem to increase retention of Aboriginal students?
- What would be the ideal housing for Aboriginal students?
- What similarities and differences are there among Aboriginal students attending post-secondary institutions?

### Methodology

Surveys were completed by 175 Aboriginal students from six post-secondary institutions for the study, which was conducted from July 2003 until March 2004. The students were from:

- University of British Columbia;
- Simon Fraser University;
- Institute of Indigenous Government;
- Native Education Centre;
- Langara Community College;
- British Columbia Institute of Technology.

An indigenous methodology, based on the values of respect, responsibility, relevance and reciprocity incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods. Both closed and open-ended surveys were administered to students.

Qualitative data was gathered through 56 participants in student group sharing circles–discussion groups and individual interviews, eight with post-secondary student services and native housing staff. The scope of the research questions and the analytical framework was based on indigenous values using a holistic, theoretical approach.

The term "holistic" was used to portray relationships among oneself, family, community, nation and environment; and the relationships among the four human development realms of the spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual.

The main approach included the identification and exploration of housing factors that helped or hindered the recruitment and the retention of Aboriginal students.

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## Findings

With regard to recruitment, the survey data showed that over half (56%) of students felt that housing was a very important or an extremely important consideration when enrolling in a post-secondary institution.

Nonetheless, about two-thirds of students were not deterred from attending their institution even if they had not confirmed housing before starting their studies and even if they experienced problems securing housing. More than half the students (60%) indicated that they had problems finding adequate housing.

Rent cost, location, condition and safety were the four most important factors in selecting what students considered adequate housing. The order of priority rated affordability first, location second, condition third, and security fourth. Female students were more likely to choose safer locations than male students, which was one of the few gender-related findings in this study.

Not surprisingly, parents with children considered the number of bedrooms, whether children were allowed and whether the unit was unfurnished as more important.

The qualitative data showed that the helping role of post-secondary student service staff and native housing staff in assisting students included providing housing information, being a student advocate, and assisting with emotional and financial problems. If students were admitted into native housing, then they were very satisfied. Native housing was affordable, which was a critical access factor.

With regard to retention, housing was the second most important factor in completing studies (after finances and before quality of the academic program).

The three most significant problems in finding adequate housing were affordability, location, and condition, which were consistent with selection factors mentioned above. Other common hindering factors identified by the participants included: children not being allowed, long waiting lists for native housing and on-campus family housing, and perceived discrimination.

Students spent much time and effort finding housing that they considered adequate for their needs/affordability and they kept moving until they found suitable accommodations. When students finally secured adequate housing they said that their anxiety and stress levels were reduced and they could then concentrate more on their studies. Students reported experiencing stress finding adequate housing. Their stress was caused by factors such as lack of finances, perceived discrimination by landlords, lack of preparedness, not knowing where and how to look for housing, and lack of family housing.

Students reported many forms of perceived discrimination, ranging from remarks, being turned away at the landlord's door even though being told before arriving that accommodation was available, being denied accommodation because of their gender or because they had children. Those students who were younger had both positive and negative experiences securing housing. Some students dressed well for their housing interviews and prepared housing resumes to overcome negative images and stereotypes that landlords might have had.

A gender-related finding was that being male, young and Aboriginal seemed to attract discrimination. As one person said, "Aboriginal males are not on anyone's priority list."

The factors that helped or hindered, when examined against the holistic framework, indicated that the most critical to Aboriginal student recruitment and retention were access, family matters, cultural relationships, and community relationships.

Generally, native housing (non-profit housing run by and for Aboriginal people) and on-campus family housing were very important helping factors for student retention. Unlike the majority of non-Aboriginal Canadian students, just over one-half of the Aboriginal student respondents had a spouse and children.

The students' extended family also impacted upon students' housing situations, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. A number of students mentioned that they had extended family visits, sometimes to help with child care, other times they themselves took on responsibility for family members. The number of family members fluctuated during the year. At times, students were afraid to tell on-campus housing authorities about the change in family circumstances for fear of being asked to leave, as there were often rules that stipulated the number of people allowed to stay in their accommodation. Research participants often stressed that family is immensely important.

They felt that because of the shortage of affordable, safe, and "decent" family housing, post-secondary institutions and Native Housing Societies needed to have flexible policies regarding allocation of housing spaces to Aboriginal post-secondary students with families and ways to accommodate extended family circumstances.

Post-secondary institutions and Native Housing that provided culturally friendly and relevant physical–social space contributed significantly to retention. This is where students practised ceremony and developed a sense of cultural community. Single students appreciated the ability to start their studies by living in campus residences.

However, differences in world view between some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students created tensions and difficulties. This resulted in Aboriginal students relocating off-campus. Aboriginal cultural and ceremonial practices were and are important to students. Student respondents indicated that post-secondary institutions needed to consider ways to accommodate the cultural, social, emotional and intellectual needs of students through housing.

Community relationships were important for retention. Some students chose to live near or on a reserve so their children could have on-reserve child care, and in order to to feel close to a First Nations community. The native housing complexes also established a sense of community caring for its tenants. One housing society saw its role as helping students complete their studies and was somewhat flexible in its administration of policies.

## CONCLUSION

Post-secondary Aboriginal student success might be improved by:

- increasing access to various forms of housing, especially family housing, with flexible occupancy policies;
- increasing post-secondary institutions, and government understanding of the importance of family to Aboriginal students;
- ensuring that housing complexes and their governing structures are culturally friendly and oriented to establishing a sense of community;
- understanding the importance of Aboriginal cultural and community relationships.

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**Housing Research at CMHC**

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